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THE
VIRTUE OF SIMPLICITY

A Sermon

*PREACHED IN THE CATHEDRAL CHURCH
OF CHRIST IN OXFORD*

ON SUNDAY, JANUARY 23, 1898

BY

THE VERY REV. FRANCIS PAGET



PRINTED BY REQUEST

HENRY GEORGE LIDDELL

HONORARY STUDENT AND SOMETIME DEAN OF
CHRIST CHURCH

Died January 18, 1898



CHARLES LUTWIDGE DODGSON

STUDENT OF CHRIST CHURCH

Died January 14, 1898

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THE VIRTUE OF SIMPLICITY

‘The light of the body is the eye: if therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light.’—ST. MATTH. vi. 22.

WITHIN the last ten days Christ Church has lost much. There are great names upon the Books of this House—names that are often on the lips of men, and high in the honour and gratitude of England. But you might count, I think, on the fingers of one hand the names of those whose work has travelled as widely, and reached as many minds, as the work of Henry George Liddell and Charles Lutwidge Dodgson. I remember Mr. Gladstone’s speaking in the Hall, more than twenty years ago, of the vast difference which the Dean’s work had made in the study of Greek—a difference hardly to be measured save by those who were learning scholarship before 1843; and now, I suppose, the finest scholar and the mere beginner are alike his debtors. And though the work that bore the fame of Lewis Carroll far and wide stands in distant

contrast with the Dean's, still it has no rival in its own wonderful and happy sphere ; and in a world where many of us laugh too seldom, and many of us laugh amiss, we all owe much to one whose brilliant and incalculable humour found for us fresh springs of clear and wholesome and unfailing laughter.

And yet, though one were to dwell long on the rare work that in these widely diverse ways has helped men and will help them, and though one were to strive to tell of Dean Liddell's constant and generous and strenuous labour for Christ Church and for Oxford, and though one were to recall point after point in all he did here, still how little would be told of what we, who knew the men themselves as guides, as friends, as colleagues, feel that their death has taken from us. It is of this that I would try to speak : for though I fail, and though the reality is bound to fade out of such knowledge while one tries through words to share it, still it may be worth trying.

In all true men the life itself is far more than its outcome—far richer, deeper, nobler, more mysterious. And fine and valuable as was the work that we recall to-day, it is no measure of our loss to say that all that work is closed ; it is not that which brings the real sense of im-

poverishment. It is that death has taken from among us two men in whose personality we had felt a certain rare and high distinction, a quality which would not go under any of the ordinary headings of average life, a note which would never sink into its monotony or be lost in its din. Something of this quality, and many of their characteristics, entered into their work as the world knows it; the work would never have won and held the place it holds had they been other than they were. But we felt in them far more than could pass into their work; and even if of late we seldom saw them, even if perhaps we never fully understood them, still we were sure of something that lifted them out of the haze and conventionality that tend to keep life level, and tempt men to call it commonplace. The wonder of personality had in them a peculiar depth and certainty and clearness. That is why their passing from us stirs in us so peculiar a sense of loss; that is, partly, why we who had the privilege of knowing them feel that, for our own sakes, we never must forget them.

Can we see at all what gives a life, a personality, this rare note of distinction, this power to touch the hearts and minds of others with an impression that they seldom get, and scarcely can disregard?

It is something more than any natural power, more than ability or vigour or determination, more than genius, more even than goodness in the ordinary use of the word. Is it not this?—the union of some rare gifts of mind or temperament, whatever they may be, with a plain simplicity of purpose in life. Simplicity, singleness and purity of aim will always give a man a certain power and independence among his fellow-men; they feel that he is unperplexed where they halt between two incompatible desires; that he is whole-hearted where they have no clear allegiance to inspire them. The least remarkable of men, if he hold fast a purpose which is adequate for the direction of a human life, may be a real force in the world. But if the single, undivided mind direct a nature which God has enriched with some rare faculty of insight, or sympathy, or imagination, or utterance, or endurance, the life is touched with a peculiar fineness and nobility. The simplicity of character lifts the natural endowment into a higher, brighter air; as men feel in the same moment, in the same act or word, at once the intellectual quality which God gives to few, and the moral beauty which His grace is ready to achieve in all. Was it not some such union of genius or ability with single-mindedness

that gave the clear note of distinction to those whom we are thinking of?—We may differ, according to our difference of taste or temperament, in appraising Charles Dodgson's genius; but that that great gift was his, that his best work ranks with the very best of its kind, this has been owned with a recognition too wide and spontaneous to leave room for doubt. The brilliant, venturesome imagination, defying forecast with ever-fresh surprise; the sense of humour in its finest and most naïve form; the power to touch with lightest hand the under-current of pathos in the midst of fun; the audacity of creative fancy, and the delicacy of insight—these are rare gifts; and surely they were his. Yes, but it was his simplicity of mind and heart that raised them all, not only in his work but in his life, in all his ways, in the man as we knew him, to something higher than any mere enumeration of them tells: that almost curious simplicity, at times, that real and touching childlikeness that marked him in all fields of thought, appearing in his love of children and in their love of him, in his dread of giving pain to any living creature, in a certain disproportion, now and then, of the view he took of things—yes, and also in that deepest life, where the pure in heart and those who become as little children see

the very truth and walk in the fear and love of God.—And so was it also with him whom yesterday we laid to rest under the shadow of the Church which owes in large part to his diligence and skill and judgement the beauty in which we know it. High gifts, indeed, were his—gifts which might have made him great in any sphere of work. An extraordinary vigour and manliness of mind; a keenness and breadth of interest which kept him always in touch with the course of events far away from his own path of work; an understanding quick to seize and strong to hold; the historian's faculty of discernment and comparison and judgement; the penetration and industry and accuracy of a true scholar; the feeling of an artist; the patience of a statesman; a natural, unfailing dignity of thought and bearing; a mastery of good English—these were elements in his rich endowment for the tasks and opportunities of life. Yes, but all these would never have made him what he was, or given to his personality that distinctive quality which we felt in it. It was his frank simplicity, his singleness of mind and purpose, his honest, unconfused sincerity, his unshaken justice that lifted these powers into true nobility, and led us always—leads us now—to be thinking far more of him than of them all.

And, thinking of him now, I find that I have unconsciously come back almost to the very words I wrote of him six years ago:—

It never even crossed one's mind that any selfish aim was creeping into his purpose, or corrupting his simple desire to do right; he never seemed to think about effect; he never stooped to questionable means of getting what he wanted done. And surely it was that high singleness of aim and effort, that fine disdain of anything like trickery, that gave his life among us its distinctive strength and worth. For, amidst all the change and confusion and excitement and ingenuity, he had the courage and the wisdom to be simple.

Simplicity can exalt the highest gifts; from it they wait to receive their true ennobling and consecration. But this is not all. For it is simplicity that throws open, as it were, the Godward windows of a life, so that from the presence of God the brightness of His truth may stream into a man's heart. Here is the promise for us all—the promise which our Lord's words convey, 'The light of the body is the eye: if therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light.' If thine eye be single—if the looking forward, the prospect of life, the view one has of it, be clear and simple and straightforward—then 'the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world,' shall flow through all the inner realm of

thought and feeling, enlightening every faculty, that we may come to 'walk in the light as' God Himself 'is in the light.' Where that light finds great gifts it transfigures them. But for us all alike it is the power of advance in liberty and strength and courage. That is the blessing of simplicity; and no lack of natural endowment or ability can bar us from it. A man is more than all men's gifts, and simplicity is the making of a man. We are weak and hampered and untrustworthy till we have learnt to look at life simply and frankly and sincerely; to set our hearts wholly upon doing what is right; to clear our minds of aims and motives which we would not own; and to judge as in the sight of Him Who will be our Judge hereafter. But if any man will try to do this, he may find his way grow clearer as the years pass by, and a strength he never looked for may increase in him, and he may know as he never thought to know the happiness of helping others, and bearing their burdens with them. 'Such as are true-hearted' often have, even in this world, a gladness springing up for them. But if we would measure fully the blessing of simplicity we must look beyond this world. We must try to imagine, so far as our faltering imagination goes, what it will be some day

to stand before Him Who requireth truth in the inward parts; to bring our life, our character, bare and unsheltered into His Presence; to know, indeed, at last that nothing, absolutely nothing, can be hid from Him; and to feel then that we must be tried by that Light which now God calls us, for His Love's sake, to welcome with simplicity into our souls, that it may guide and rule us day by day, till it bring us where the pure in heart see Him.

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